IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

(Although it may not be a smooth sail during this period, we shall discuss on how your company and employees can navigate while transitioning into the new normal).

When it was initially announced on the 5th of January, 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the Corona Virus (COVID-19) outbreak in China (the city of WUHAN being identified as ground zero), the world was closely watching. It was almost surreal and difficult to process and digest what was happening in the far-east at the time. On 11th March, 2020 the Corona Virus was officially characterized by the WHO as a global pandemic. The news of a global pandemic was unprecedented at the time, leaving companies, employees, families vulnerable and unprepared to what was to follow next.

Today, with the regular updates and guidance from the World Health Organisation, our medical experts, social media platforms, published articles, government entities, and the media, we have been provided with means and methods on how to protect ourselves and our loved ones from having to contract the virus, until when the vaccine is produced.

The coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak has prompted schools and businesses to shut down, with the exception of a few privately-owned companies/firms that can manage to remain operational remotely. The closing of businesses has led to an **impact on employment relations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic** crippling some companies and affecting the livelihoods of many families who are experiencing the ripple effects of their place of work/businesses having to shut down.

To build your business resilience one should start evaluating their core business system(s) one must critically review their organization's needs and formulate a strategy to optimally carry out communications in adapting to the changing business environment and adapting to the "New Normal." Secondly, plan for a short-term strategy to cope with disruptions while planning out for a more strategic operational plan to accommodate changes in your workforce. And finally, it is crucial to re-evaluate and develop a long term approach in enhancing a business continuity plan which will keep your business at bay in meeting with the challenges throughout this pandemic for weeks/months ahead.

Below outlined, are some strategies that would help employers and employees cope with the

COVID-19 phase, as well as developing a business continuity plan post-corona virus.

1. **<u>WORKING REMOTELY:</u>**

With the sudden outbreak of the coronavirus, businesses closed their doors and, subjecting their staff to work remotely from home as a precautionary measure in prioritizing the health and safety of both its employees and clients respectively. For some companies, it has been daunting having to work remotely and considered an unchartered territory. However, it has become imperative that companies must learn to adapt in order to survive and tackle the challenges head-on. The key is to ensure thorough research on how to lay your company's groundwork while working remotely. That's why it's so important to offer tools and resources to your employees that will support their work and encourage communication and teamwork. Similarly, because remote work can be isolating, it's important to ensure that everyone in your organization – yourself included – is taking steps to promote wellness and wellbeing, as you'll learn below.

To Employers;

- **Ensure to incorporate the right technological tools** (customized to your organization's line of work) that will facilitate working remotely. Having the right technology, will enable your organization to have access to all relevant information pertaining to your work and clients' information at your fingertips. This will enable you to immediately identify and communicate effectively should anything arise. The basics include; computers, internal system or software tool, setting up cloud accounts (to store and share data and information), internet accessibility, etc. Chat tools like, video conferencing tools like Zoom, and online portals and other messaging tools built soft-wares can make all the difference when you're working from home. Not only will they help you collaborate and communicate more quickly and efficiently with work colleagues, but they'll also help to make you feel more connected and less isolated.

- **Setting up a cloud account** easy to access as and when required, enabling you to respond to client inquiries.
- **Having a secured software** that will enable a systematic workflow within your organization as well as enabling you to have access to any and all information relevant

to your work; synchronized calendaring system, clients' database, accounting system(for billing, invoices & payments information), documents, internal and external communications, etc. Include mobile accessibility of the software should you happened to be away from your PC, for instance on the road, and a client reaches out to you in dire need of your assistance which would require you to access information within your software tool.

- **Set up an online client portal;** due to working remotely the amount of phone calls and emails would inevitably increase and having to attend to phone calls (convoluted and often lengthy) and reading through email trails (when scanning for a particular email that requires your immediate attention) that pile up within the minute whilst working tend to disrupt your workflow, derailing you from what you were presently working on. Thus setting up a web-based client portal is advisable as your ideal means of communication depending on your organizational type; for example, law firms, customer service industry, etc.
- **Cyber Security;** it goes without saying the importance of establishing a cybersecurity procedure for your company and having to provide training on those policies to your team/staff members. It is imperative, now that most of you will be working remotely, to fully understand the procedures and risks, including how to avoid malware and recognizing suspicious phishing emails. Hackers are on the rise amidst COVID-19, and for companies who have not set up a cybersecurity procedure are vulnerable and susceptible to a potential breach in your company's system.

To Employees:

- *Routine*; sticking to your normal routine(as you would when having to report to the office); the times you get ready for work, your regular grooming habits, change out of your pajamas, and avoid sweat pants/leggings. Instead dress into your casual Friday outfits that would be comfortable yet professional. These would help uplift your mood and activate you into the work mode mindset.
- *Workspace;* It is important to choose one or two areas in your home from which you'll work. You may not have the perfect workspace or better equipped for work, but try and acquire a comfortable chair and a stand-up desk.
- *Work environment and minimizing distractions;* establish clear-cut guidelines with your family from the start. Your kids are home, too, and for them, it may feel like a never-ending vacation. They'll understandably want to spend time with you. Make sure to let them know when it's acceptable to interrupt you – and when it's not. If you must, even lock the door.
- *Regular breaks & exercise;* every25 minutes get up and stretch, walk around, go outside and get some fresh air, grab a snack, or do some deep breathing. Anything you

do for a brief change of pace can make all the difference to your productivity and sanity.

2. **EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT.**

We are living in an era where every aspect of our life is shaped by technology. The list of impacts is long and it includes the work culture too. Unlike earlier where every worker was required to be carried out from our offices could now be done from anywhere that to more efficiently.

Several countries are now under a state of lockdown to contain the spread of corona-virus. And this has led many businesses to implement a work from home policy or allow remote work to keep their employees safe and operations going.

Moving apart from the usual office setup and working from home for a prolonged period will surely make your employees feel isolated and demoralized at some of the time. This is why the charge is now upon the managers and HR leaders to take appropriate measures to keep up their employees' spirit and maintain great employee engagement levels even if your workforce is scattered across places.

- **Build a much stronger communication regime with your remote teams**

As a good leader you are expected to have strong communication skills, and it is important to maintain constant communication with your employees. They look up to you in leading them out of their concerns and help them better focus on important matters especially during this pandemic. Thus, for those who were not accustomed to working remotely, this will boost their morale and motivate them and concentrate better on their work.

Another tip here for you is to begin your day with a quick meeting with all the teams. This will help both you and your employees to stay on track for driving better results even if they are all apart.

2.2 Don't forget to cheer them up with instant appreciation

Developing a culture of employee recognition and their efforts in any organization is

pertinent in motivating the performance of your employees.

However, due to remote working, the casual approach of simply walking to your employee's desk or office is not an option, and time to be creative in creating a staff recognition program (cloud-based and recognition system) that will enable you to keep your workforce engaged and motivated.

A cloud-based employee rewards and recognition system that makes sure you never miss a moment and recognize your employees instantly no matter where they are. Such a system also allows your employees to appreciate and even nominate their colleagues for various awards ushering a culture of peer recognition which is much needed in the present situation.

Types of employee recognition;

- Managerial recognition.
- Peer to peer recognition

Benefits of introducing this system include;

- Retaining employees.
- Enhances job satisfaction for employees.
- Ensures a better and more positive employee engagement.
- Creates a positive company culture.

Having a system in your company for employee recognition that will work within your organization is essential and as their leader, are responsible for rewarding your employees from time to time.

2.3 Flexibility

When working from home your employees might also have to engage themselves in their own household chores and you must understand it. Allowing your employees some flexibility to focus on their personal works isn't a bad idea whereas it'll help them get back to work with a free mind. Therefore, you must really take appropriate measure to ensure flexibility for motivating your employees and strengthen their commitment towards the organization.

2.4 Create a virtual community with all your employees

Working from home for a prolonged period of time especially under these circumstances is

surely going to a toll over the mental health of your remote employees. This arises due to the void where your employees are no longer able to experience their usual office culture. At the office, your employees get the chance to meet their colleagues and get involved in casual conversations which creates a very lively atmosphere around. However, it takes a setback when all your employees are separated.

The only way to mitigate this is to build a virtual community among your employees where everyone can stay connected 24×7. Also, remember to keep this virtual community totally informal which would allow your employees to speak up their mind in a profound manner and maintain their workplace camaraderie even if they are confined to their homes.

2.5 Introducing online team building activities

Creating virtual team building activities are ideal for employees working remotely, though organizing it is much easier when you are all in one room (the office). Such activities would help employees engage as a team and display their unity.

Such online team building activities could be as simple as; Online office games, team health challenges, virtual coffee breaks, sharing knowledge on various topics, virtual lunch meetings, and many more that can be suggested by team members or found online.

Engaging your employees has become crucial, in spite of having stockpiles assets and other resources that may help your organization run faster in the race, but it is your employees who hold the key to success. And with the help of the present-day technology, deploying employee engagement measures is possible even via virtual approach.

In conclusion, be as honest and open as possible even when you don't have all the answers your employees are looking for. Due to the **impact on employment relations amidst the covid-19 pandemic** it is best to communicate on ways you plan to support them and openly acknowledge the stress you are all experiencing. Whenever possible empower them to help you brainstorm, research, and make decisions. These actions will go a long way toward maintaining good relations with your staff and improving everyone's well-being.